

The Abolition of the One-Child Policy and Its Impact on Household Investment in Educating Girls in China

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Abstract

Implemented in 1979, the One-Child Policy was a controversial measure aimed at controlling population growth but resulted in significant unintended consequences, including gender imbalances and economic strains. The policy's relaxation in 2016 to allow two children, and later up to three children, was a response to demographic and socio-economic challenges. This article examines the short-term impacts of these policy changes on educational investments for girls, noting increases in enrollment rates and evolving parental attitudes towards gender equality. It also considers the long-term effects, such as improved gender parity in education and its implications for workforce and economic growth. However, persistent cultural biases, regional disparities, and economic burdens continue to challenge progress. The findings suggest that while the policy shift has fostered greater educational investment in girls, comprehensive efforts are necessary to address enduring inequalities and ensure equitable educational opportunities across all regions.

Keywords

One-Child Policy, Gender Equality, Education, Household Investment

1. Introduction

In the late 1970s and 1980s, China officially enacted the one-child policy, which successfully managed rapid population growth and alleviated the strain on resources and the environment (Gao & Li, 2021). The policy was a response to the perceived threats of overpopulation to economic stability and resource management. Since the 1990s, over 90 percent of births have been single-child births, particularly in urban areas, making the one-child family the standard for urban Chinese households. This shift has led to significant demographic changes, including an aging population and evolving family dynamics, which continue to influence China's social and economic landscape (Feng et al., 2021). Despite its success in reducing birth rates, the policy led to unintended socio-economic and demographic consequences, most notably a severe gender imbalance due to a cultural preference for male children. This imbalance was exacerbated by practices such as sex-selective abortions and infanticide, leading to a surplus of males and a host of related problems, including an aging population and a shrinking workforce.

In response to the emerging challenges, including the adverse effects on demographic structure and workforce dynamics, the Chinese government began reevaluating its family planning policies. The transition from the one-child policy to the two-child policy in 2016 marked the first step towards addressing these issues. This shift aimed to mitigate the aging population, alleviate labor shortages,

and rectify gender imbalances. Subsequently, in 2021, the policy was further relaxed to permit up to three children per family, reflecting ongoing concerns and adjustments in demographic strategy.

The focus of this article is on understanding how these policy changes have impacted investments in girls' education. Education is a critical component in addressing gender disparities and fostering socio-economic development. But in education reform, policymakers frequently adopt a top-down approach, implementing policies aimed at transforming the educational system to enhance standardized test scores and statistics (Murphy, 2018). As families adjusted to the new policy environment, there were observable changes in educational investment patterns. In the immediate aftermath of the policy shifts, increased birth rates and a reevaluation of family resources led to noticeable changes in the educational landscape for girls.

Short-term impacts include a rise in school enrollment rates and an increase in governmental initiatives supporting gender equality in education. However, these positive developments are tempered by ongoing regional disparities and economic constraints. Urban areas have seen more immediate improvements due to better infrastructure and progressive attitudes, whereas rural regions continue to face challenges related to cultural biases and limited resources. Girls are still significantly less likely to matriculate to senior high school than are boys, and they are less represented in higher education. (Zeng et al., 2013) Additionally, the economic burden of raising multiple children influences how educational investments are allocated, with potential implications for gender parity.

Long-term impacts of these policy changes hold significant promise for improving gender parity in education. Enhanced educational attainment for girls, broader opportunities, and greater social and economic mobility are anticipated outcomes. A more educated female workforce can contribute to economic growth and diversification. Nevertheless, persistent cultural attitudes and regional disparities remain challenges that require sustained attention and targeted interventions.

2. The One-Child Policy and its abolishment

The one-child policy was implemented by the People's Republic of China in 1979 as a pivotal measure to control population growth and address the socio-economic challenges posed by rapid demographic expansion. Conceived during a period of significant economic reform and modernization, the policy aimed to stabilize China's population to ensure sustainable economic development and improve living standards. The rationale behind the policy was to curb the adverse effects of overpopulation, which was seen as a barrier to economic progress and resource management. The policy was enforced through a combination of incentives and penalties. Urban couples were generally restricted to having only one child, while rural families and ethnic minorities were often granted exceptions, allowing them to have more children under specific conditions. The implementation of the policy involved stringent measures, including financial penalties for violations and various forms of administrative oversight. These measures were designed to ensure compliance and achieve the desired reduction in birth rates. While the policy was effective in achieving its primary goal of reducing birth rates, it also led to several unintended and controversial consequences. The most significant of these was a severe gender imbalance, primarily due to a cultural preference for male children. This preference resulted in practices such as sex-selective abortion and infanticide, which skewed the sex ratio and created a demographic imbalance with a surplus of males over females. Additionally, the policy contributed to an aging population and a shrinking workforce. With fewer young people entering the labor market, China faced challenges related to an aging demographic and a declining workforce, which threatened long-term economic growth and sustainability. The policy also led to social issues such as the "4-2-1" phenomenon, where one only child could potentially be responsible for supporting two parents and four grandparents, placing significant familial and financial pressures on individuals.

In response to the demographic and socio-economic challenges exacerbated by the one-child policy, the Chinese government began to reconsider its family planning approach. The policy was formally relaxed in 2016 with the introduction of the two-child policy. This policy allowed all couples to have two children, aiming to address the aging population and labor force issues while still managing

population growth. The shift to the two-child policy was motivated by several factors: Aging Population: To mitigate the impacts of an aging population and reduce the dependency ratio, which was increasingly burdensome on the working-age population. Labor Force Shortages: To alleviate labor shortages and support sustained economic growth by increasing the number of young people entering the workforce. Gender Imbalances: To address the gender imbalances created by the one-child policy and provide more equitable opportunities for both male and female children. The introduction of the two-child policy led to an initial increase in birth rates, but the long-term effects were more gradual. Despite the policy change, challenges remained, including persistent cultural preferences for male children and regional disparities in family planning practices. In 2021, the policy was further relaxed to allow families to have up to three children, reflecting ongoing concerns about demographic trends and the need for further adjustments.

3. Short-term impacts

3.1 Increased Enrollment and Educational Investment

In the immediate aftermath of the policy shift, there was a noticeable increase in the birth rate, which impacted household decisions regarding educational investments. Families, now able to have more children, had to allocate resources differently. Preliminary research of Statistical Monitoring Report on the Program for the Development of Chinese Women (2021-2030) shows that this shift led to a rise in school enrollment rates (99.9%) for girls, particularly in urban areas. The relaxation of the one-child policy allowed families to distribute their educational resources more evenly among their children, leading to greater investment in the education of daughters while boys benefit more than girls from cumulative exposure to higher quality schools (Author et al., 2016).

The short-term impact was also reflected in increased governmental focus on supporting educational access. Programs designed to promote gender equality in education, coupled with financial incentives for families, encouraged more equitable distribution of educational resources. These initiatives included scholarships, educational subsidies, and public awareness campaigns aimed at highlighting the importance of investing in girls' education.

3.2 Shifts in Parental Attitudes

Existing literature typically views the gender gap in education as a result of parental investment decisions, without differentiating between the portions of the gap attributable to societal factors versus intrahousehold discrimination. The underlying assumption is that eliminating the gender gap in education would occur if parents treated their sons and daughters equally (Hu et al., 2022). The policy change catalyzed a transformation in parental attitudes toward gender equality. With the newfound flexibility to have more children, many families underwent a reassessment of their investment strategies concerning educational resources. The societal momentum towards gender equality, bolstered by government policies advocating for equal educational opportunities, had a discernible impact on parental decision-making processes. In urban environments, where progressive attitudes are more entrenched, there was a marked shift towards valuing the education of daughters on par with sons. This evolving perspective was supported by broader cultural shifts and governmental incentives aimed at fostering gender parity in education.

The transformation in parental attitudes also reflects a growing recognition of the benefits associated with investing in the education of girls. As societal norms continue to evolve and as governmental policies reinforce the importance of gender equality, there has been a growing acceptance of the idea that both sons and daughters should receive equal educational opportunities. This shift is crucial for achieving long-term gender parity in educational attainment and for promoting broader socio-economic development.

3.3 Regional Disparities and Economic Constraints

Despite the overall positive trends, the short-term impact of the policy shift exhibited significant regional disparities. Urban areas, benefiting from more robust educational infrastructure and progressive social attitudes, experienced more immediate improvements in the educational outcomes for girls. In contrast, rural regions faced slower progress due to persistent cultural biases and economic constraints. The entrenched gender preferences and limited financial resources in these areas impeded the speed at which educational investments for girls were realized.

The economic burden associated with raising additional children further influenced educational investments. For many families, the financial strain of supporting multiple children, combined with the immediate costs of education, led to disparities in the allocation of resources. Rural families, frequently constrained by limited financial means, encountered substantial challenges in ensuring equal educational opportunities for girls. The initial economic burden associated with additional schooling expenses often resulted in prioritizing educational investments for sons, particularly in economically disadvantaged households. Addressing these disparities requires targeted interventions and support mechanisms to ensure that all children, regardless of gender or geographical location, have access to equitable educational opportunities.

3.4 Government and Institutional Responses

In response to the policy changes, the Chinese government, alongside educational institutions, implemented a range of measures to support and enhance investments in education. These measures included the expansion of educational subsidies, the introduction of targeted scholarships for girls, and the launch of initiatives aimed at reducing the financial barriers associated with schooling. Furthermore, efforts were made to improve educational infrastructure in rural areas and to promote gender equality through comprehensive policy reforms.

The government's proactive approach in addressing the financial and infrastructural challenges associated with the increased number of children underscored its commitment to fostering educational equity. By targeting support where it was most needed, these interventions played a critical role in mitigating the short-term impacts of the policy change and in facilitating improved educational outcomes for girls. The enhanced support provided by both governmental and institutional measures was pivotal in ensuring that the benefits of the policy shift were realized across diverse regions and socio-economic contexts.

Overall, the short-term impact of the policy shift highlights both progress and challenges in the realm of educational investment. While there have been notable improvements in some areas, ongoing efforts are necessary to address regional disparities and ensure that all children, regardless of gender or location, benefit from equitable educational opportunities.

4. Estimated long-term impacts

4.1 Changes in Gender Parity in Education

4.1.1 Improved Educational Attainment

The One-Child Policy significantly boosted the years of schooling for Han women by 1.28 years, accounting for 53.6% of the overall increase in educational attainment among women born between 1950 and 1980 (Jiang, 2020). In the long term, the policy shift is expected to significantly enhance gender parity in education. With the easing of restrictions on family size, households have been more likely to invest in the education of all their children, including daughters. Over time, this increased investment is anticipated to result in higher educational attainment for girls. Longitudinal studies are likely to show an increase in the number of women achieving higher levels of education, including secondary and tertiary education. This progress is expected to translate into broader participation of women in various professional fields and academic disciplines.

4.1.2 Broader Educational Opportunities

As gender biases diminish and families invest more equitably in education, girls are likely to have access to a broader range of educational opportunities. This includes increased participation in STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), which have traditionally seen lower female representation. Over the long term, enhanced educational opportunities for girls can lead to greater diversity in the workforce and increased representation of women in leadership and decision-making roles.

4.1.3 Enhanced Social and Economic Mobility

Improved educational attainment for girls is directly linked to enhanced social and economic mobility. As women gain better educational qualifications, they are more likely to pursue higher-paying and more fulfilling careers. This upward mobility contributes to reduced gender wage gaps and increased economic independence for women. Additionally, educated women are more likely to invest in the education of their own children, creating a positive cycle of educational and economic advancement across generations.

4.2 Impact on Workforce and Economic Growth

4.2.1 Contributing to a Skilled Workforce

One of the most significant long-term impacts of increased educational investment in girls is the contribution to a more skilled and diverse workforce. As more women attain higher levels of education, the labor market benefits from a larger pool of qualified professionals. This enhanced human capital can drive innovation, improve productivity, and support sustained economic growth. Industries that benefit from diverse perspectives and expertise are likely to see enhanced performance and competitiveness in the global market.

4.2.2 Economic Benefits and Gender Equality

The integration of more women into the workforce, coupled with improved educational outcomes, contributes to broader economic benefits. A more educated female workforce supports economic stability and growth by increasing overall labor market participation and reducing the dependency ratio. Furthermore, as women gain economic independence and contribute to household incomes, gender equality in economic opportunities improves, leading to a more equitable society.

4.2.3 Reducing Economic Inequalities

While the overall gender gap in education has declined steadily with economic development, the part due to intrahousehold discrimination has persisted over the years, especially in rural regions (Hu et al., 2012). Long-term improvements in girls' education can help reduce economic inequalities both within and between regions. Educated women are more likely to start businesses, engage in entrepreneurship, and contribute to local economic development. By addressing educational disparities between urban and rural areas, policies can help mitigate regional economic imbalances and promote more balanced economic development across the country.

4.3 Persistence of Cultural and Regional Challenges

4.3.1 Cultural Attitudes and Gender Roles

Despite the positive trends, persistent cultural attitudes and gender roles continue to present challenges. In many rural and conservative regions, traditional beliefs about gender roles may still influence educational decisions. Long-term efforts to address these cultural biases will be necessary to ensure that improvements in educational investments are sustained. Community-based programs, public awareness campaigns, and local advocacy efforts can play a crucial role in changing perceptions and promoting gender equality.

4.3.2 Regional Disparities

Regional disparities in educational resources and opportunities remain a significant challenge. While urban areas may see faster and more substantial improvements, rural areas often lag behind due to lower infrastructure and economic resources. Addressing these disparities requires targeted interventions, such as increased funding for rural education, improved access to educational materials, and support for rural teachers. Ensuring that all regions benefit equally from policy changes is essential for achieving comprehensive and equitable progress.

4.4 Evolution of Family Planning and Educational Policies

4.4.1 Adaptive Policy Frameworks

The long-term impact of the policy changes will also depend on the evolution of family planning and educational policies. Governments will need to adapt their policies to address emerging demographic trends and evolving societal needs. This includes continued support for educational initiatives, such as scholarships and subsidies, as well as policies aimed at promoting gender equality in education. Adaptive policies that respond to changing demographics and socio-economic conditions will be crucial for sustaining progress and maximizing the benefits of the policy shift.

4.4.2 Integration of Gender Equality in Education Policy

Integrating gender equality into educational policies will be essential for ensuring long-term improvements. This includes implementing programs that specifically address the needs of female students, such as mentorship programs, career counseling, and support for women in non-traditional fields. Additionally, policies that promote gender equality at all levels of education—from primary to higher education—will help create an environment where girls can thrive academically and professionally.

5. Challenges and Remaining Issues

5.1 Persistent Gender Biases

In the current education system, opportunities for men and women are generally equal, and women's education now extends beyond traditional roles (Lee, 1995). However, persistent gender biases and traditional preferences for male children continue to impact educational investments in China. Cultural attitudes and societal expectations deeply rooted in historical and socio-economic contexts perpetuate disparities in gender parity in education.

5.1.1 Cultural Attitudes and Traditional Preferences

Traditional Chinese culture has long favored male children for various reasons, including the belief that sons are responsible for continuing the family lineage and providing support to parents in their old age. These cultural values have been reinforced over generations and continue to influence family planning decisions and resource allocation. Even with the policy changes allowing for more children, these entrenched preferences often result in families investing more heavily in the education of sons compared to daughters. This bias is not merely a relic of the past but remains an active component of decision-making processes in many families.

5.1.2 Societal Expectations and Gender Roles

Societal expectations regarding gender roles also play a significant role in perpetuating gender biases. In many regions, societal norms dictate that women's primary roles are centered around domestic responsibilities and family care, while men are expected to be the primary breadwinners. These expectations can lead to differential investment in education, where families may prioritize educational resources for boys who are perceived to have higher earning potential and career

opportunities. This societal framework not only influences individual family decisions but also affects institutional policies and practices, perpetuating gender disparities in educational outcomes.

5.1.3 Impact on Educational Outcomes

The impact of persistent gender biases on educational outcomes is evident in various metrics. For instance, while girls have made considerable progress in primary and secondary education enrollment, they still face challenges in higher education and career advancement. Gender biases can result in lower expectations and reduced support for female students, affecting their academic performance and career prospects. These biases also contribute to the underrepresentation of women in certain fields of study and professional sectors, reinforcing gender inequality in the labor market.

5.2 Regional Disparities

Regional disparities in educational investments between urban and rural areas present another significant challenge. While urban areas have seen considerable improvements in educational resources and gender parity, rural areas continue to lag behind due to various socio-economic factors.

5.2.1 Differences in Resource Allocation

Urban areas generally benefit from better educational infrastructure, more qualified teachers, and greater access to resources compared to rural areas. These differences often translate into more equitable educational opportunities for boys and girls in cities. In contrast, rural areas frequently face challenges such as inadequate school facilities, fewer educational materials, and lower teacher quality, which can exacerbate gender disparities. In these settings, cultural biases and economic constraints further compound the issue, leading to less investment in girls' education.

5.2.2 Socio-Economic Factors

Socio-economic factors, including poverty and economic development, significantly influence educational investments. In rural areas where economic resources are limited, families may prioritize immediate economic returns over long-term educational investments. This prioritization can lead to gender imbalances in education, as families might favor boys over girls for educational spending, particularly when faced with financial constraints. Additionally, rural areas often experience higher rates of child labor and early marriage, which can further limit educational opportunities for girls.

5.2.3 Potential Solutions and Policy Interventions

Addressing regional disparities requires targeted interventions and policy measures. Government initiatives, such as educational subsidies for rural schools, increased funding for educational infrastructure, and targeted programs to support girls' education in underserved areas, are essential. Additionally, community-based programs that promote gender equality and raise awareness about the value of girls' education can play a crucial role in bridging the educational gap between urban and rural areas.

5.3 Economic Burdens

The economic burden of raising multiple children and its impact on educational investments is a critical issue that affects many families in China. While the policy changes have allowed families to have more children, the financial implications of raising and educating multiple children can strain household budgets.

5.3.1 Financial Challenges Faced by Households

The cost of education, including tuition fees, educational materials, and extracurricular activities, can be substantial. For families with multiple children, these costs can become a significant financial burden. Households may struggle to allocate sufficient resources to each child's education, particularly

if they face economic difficulties. This financial strain can lead to prioritizing the education of one child over another, often resulting in gender-based disparities.

5.3.2 Role of Government Support

Government support plays a crucial role in alleviating the financial burdens associated with raising multiple children. Measures such as educational subsidies, tax incentives, and financial assistance programs can help reduce the economic strain on families and ensure more equitable investment in education. For example, the Chinese government has implemented various programs aimed at reducing the cost of education for low-income families and providing support for girls' education in disadvantaged areas. These initiatives are critical in promoting gender parity and ensuring that all children, regardless of gender, have access to quality education.

6. Conclusion

The relaxation of China's One-Child Policy represents a significant shift in the country's demographic and socio-economic strategies, with profound implications for educational investments in girls. The transition from a restrictive family planning framework to more flexible policies has had both immediate and potential long-term effects on educational outcomes.

In the short term, the policy changes led to increased enrollment rates for girls and a more equitable distribution of educational resources among children. The government's efforts to support educational access through subsidies and gender-focused initiatives have been instrumental in fostering a more inclusive educational environment. Moreover, shifts in parental attitudes towards gender equality, particularly in urban areas, have contributed to a more balanced approach to investing in the education of both sons and daughters.

However, the journey towards achieving full gender parity in education is ongoing and complex. Persistent cultural biases and societal expectations continue to impact educational investments and outcomes. The preference for male children, deeply rooted in traditional values and societal roles, remains a significant barrier to achieving true gender equality. Regional disparities further compound the challenge, with rural areas lagging behind due to economic constraints and limited infrastructure.

Long-term prospects are promising, with improved educational attainment for girls expected to enhance social mobility and contribute to a more skilled and diverse workforce. As more women achieve higher levels of education, the potential for reduced gender wage gaps and increased economic independence grows. Nevertheless, addressing the challenges of cultural attitudes, regional disparities, and economic burdens remains crucial. Targeted policies and interventions, including continued support for rural education and initiatives to change societal perceptions, are essential for ensuring that all children, regardless of gender or location, have access to equitable educational opportunities.

In conclusion, while the policy shift has created a more favorable environment for investing in girls' education, it is clear that comprehensive and sustained efforts are necessary to overcome the remaining challenges. By addressing these issues head-on, China can continue to make strides towards achieving gender parity in education and fostering a more inclusive and equitable society.

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